RECONSTRUCTING GENDER
A Multicultural Anthology

Third Edition

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FROM NOTHING, A CONSCIOUSNESS

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Despite my deference to traditional Chinese behavior, the day finally came when I had to disobey my father. I had received several offers of full scholarships to attend college. Like the Chinese who lined up for the imperial civil service examinations in hopes of a new life, I viewed college as my means of escape from the narrow life of making flower shop baby novelties in our dull New Jersey town.

Though my father was proud of my educational achievement, he didn’t want me to leave for college. He had already stated his desire for me to attend the closest school to home. When the time came for him to sign the college registration forms, he refused. “The proper place for an unmarried daughter is at home with her parents,” he insisted. He wanted to keep me out of trouble until I found a husband to do the overseeing.

I could see the doors to my future slamming shut. At age seventeen, I had never knowingly disobeyed my father. I policed myself, turning down dates, invitations to parties, and even educational opportunities away from home, because I thought Dad would disapprove. I was caught between two conflicting Asian ideals. The Three Obediences* demanded subservience from females, but the primacy of education taught me to seek advancement through study. My American side told me to heed my own call.

Somehow I mustered the courage to shout, “No! I’m going to college.” I don’t know who was more surprised by my outburst, my father or me. He said nothing more about the subject, and I continued my preparations to leave. I also finally learned that the world wouldn’t end if I challenged authority, a lesson I would take with me to college.

My father was right on one account—I intended to look for trouble in the campus political and social movements that appeared on the news each night. The call for civil rights was all around me, beginning in my own high school. Women’s liberation offered an alternative to the Three Obediences. Then there was the war in Vietnam, involving yet another Asian enemy. My

* [The daughter obeys the father, the wife obeys the husband, and, eventually, the widow obeys the son.]

father was against the war because he saw U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia as a continuation of American domination over the people of Asia. At the dinner table my father lectured us about the immorality of the war; the next day I'd go to school and sit through government propaganda films and civics teachers condemning the Communist scourge and extolling the importance of the war effort to democracy.

For an Asian American kid, the worst part about the Vietnam War was watching the carnage on the news every night, with people who looked like my mom and dad machine-gunned from U.S. helicopters, scorched by American-made napalm, executed at point-blank range, igniting themselves with gasoline in protest, being massacred in their homes and ridiculed on TV shows. It seemed that we had killed the entire population of Vietnam many times over for all the dead who were reported in the body counts each night.

The constant barrage aimed at stirring up patriotic zeal against the Vietnamese enemy took its toll on Asian Americans, in the same way that the previous hostilities with Japan, China, and North Korea had. Many kids in my school had relatives fighting—and dying—in Vietnam. One classmate could barely look at me because I reminded her of the war that killed her older brother. Encountering her in gym class was awkward and sad. At the dry cleaner's and the doughnut shop where I worked in the summers, plenty of GIs would stop in, and some would have to comment. "They're everywhere, aren't they?" a soldier customer said to his buddy as I handed him his laundered and starched fatigues. I had become the local personification of a war nearly ten thousand miles away. Since I looked like the enemy, I must be the enemy.

At the same time, there was no place for me in the debates over national issues like the war or racial equality. People like me were absent from everything that was considered to be "American"—from TV, movies, newspapers, history, and everyday discussions that took place in the school yard. It was hard to feel American when I wasn't treated like one. Yet I didn't feel Asian, either: I couldn't speak Chinese and I hardly knew Chinatown, let alone China. The void left me with many questions.

In the spring of my senior year in high school, the small group of Asian American undergraduates at Princeton University invited me to an orientation meeting. My incoming first-year class had the largest number of Asian Americans ever—sixteen men and four women, nearly as many as the three upper classes combined. I was excited to be part of this tiny but growing Asian student body, coming to Princeton on a full scholarship, part of the wave that drove the university to open its doors to women for the first time in more than two hundred years. In the decades before my arrival, Princeton and the other Ivy League schools accepted only a few Asian students a year, most likely from Asia, not American-born Asians. Though I graduated from high school at the top of my class, I knew that I never would have been admitted to Princeton were it not for the civil rights movement. I was eager to find this movement, as soon as I could escape the watchful eyes of my parents.
The day of my orientation program happened to coincide with a massive student protest and strike at Princeton. The common areas were a sea of young people with placards, banners, and peace signs. Some were locked in earnest debate; others were simply playing Frisbee in the sun. Excited to have found my element, I headed to the Little Hall dormitory to meet the Asian American students.

When I and the handful of other visiting high school seniors knocked on the door that afternoon, we were shocked to find that our hosts were still asleep. About a half-dozen or so Asian American undergraduates were sprawled in various parts of the dorm suite. Strewn around them were beer cans, liquor bottles, ashtrays full of cigarette butts, and other paraphernalia. I was glad that my non-smoking, teetotaler parents had not come along, or I might never have made it to college after all. Our student mentors had been up all night, protesting, partying, debating the role that Asian American students should play in the Third World liberation movement and antiwar student strikes. They regaled us with tales of their lives as Asian American student protesters. I was on the road to discovering my own identity as an Asian American.

I wasn’t alone in my quest. The Asian American baby boomers were all approaching college age. For the first time in American history, we were being admitted into colleges and universities in visible numbers as racial barriers began to come down. Some students were from immigrant families like mine, while others were multi-generation Americans.

The foreign-born Chinese students called us American-born types “jook sings,” or “hollow bamboo” — Chinese on the outside, but empty inside. The kids from Hawaii were so much more secure in both their Asianness and their Americanness, having grown up in an Asian American majority; they called Japanese Americans from the mainland “katonks” — empty coconuts. The Chinatown kids seemed streetwise and hip, while students from places such as Phoenix, Buffalo, and Columbus were more like me, having grown up without seeing many faces like our own. Some Asian Americans I met called for Yellow Power, in the same spirit as Black Power advocates; others were so assimilated that they were called “bananas.”

For the first time in my life, I heard about the internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans from third-generation — Sansei — Japanese American students. The experience of being incarcerated for presumed disloyalty was so painful that many of their parents refused to discuss it with them. I heard about Chinese “paper sons” who were “adopted” by Chinese men living in the United States after all immigration records were destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. And about the Filipino “manongs” — old uncles — who worked the farms of California and the West, moving from harvest to harvest. We taught ourselves much of this information, using dog-eared mimeographed course syllabi gathered from Asian American courses in California and elsewhere like a new Holy Grail.

I began to make the connections between past history and my own life, understanding, for example, how the effort to deport my father in the early 1950s was linked to Chinese Americans of the 1800s. When the Immigration
and Naturalization Service debated whether to permit my underemployed father to stay in the United States, the fact that he was the sole breadwinner for two infant U.S. citizens by birth swayed their decision. Henry and I were Americans thanks to an 1898 Supreme Court decision in response to a lawsuit by Wong Kim Ark.

I imagined people with Asian faces taking part in American life in a way that I had never before dreamed possible. A new generation of Asian Americans was injecting itself into national debates on civil rights, equality for women, poverty, workplace and labor issues, South African apartheid—we didn’t limit the breadth of our vision. Just like the other baby boomers of all races in that 1960s and 1970s era, we knew we were making history. The excitement of that historical sweep added an element of grandeur to our activities; we weren’t afraid to think big.

In the spring of 1971, a joint committee of the black, Latino, and Asian American students decided it was time to make the university address the racial inequities on campus. Princeton had very few students of color then, about a hundred in an undergraduate student body of nearly four thousand. We agreed that life at Princeton for students of color was akin to being stuck in a vast snowdrift, and it was time to thaw the university out. Our small numbers didn’t deter us.

The leadership wanted to make a bold, definitive statement, so they decided that our loose grouping of minority students—Third World students—should seize and occupy Firestone Library and call for a massive rally at the University Chapel. We would denounce racism at Princeton and the racist war in Vietnam. We would demand an end to the war, as well as the creation of programs, courses, and a center for Third World students. To a first-year student from a sheltered Confucian home in New Jersey, this was the big time.

Princeton in 1971 was almost entirely male, having admitted its first women undergraduates in 1969. I was one of the half-dozen Asian American women students on campus, and the only one involved in this grandiose plan. Until then I assisted the guys by taking on useful “female” chores like learning to run a mimeograph machine. But this ambitious library plan caught us shorthanded, and somehow I was assigned the task of handling security for the takeover.

Firestone Library is bigger than most castles—and built like one. In my one previous attempt at security, I had installed a padlock on my bedroom door so my brothers wouldn’t trash my room; that failed when they screwed the latch off the door. But I took my job very seriously and ran through all of Firestone, getting a good aerobic workout. Our little band of Third World men and a few women entered Firestone one afternoon and refused to come out. We secured the building and declared it occupied. I missed the main action, if there was any, because I was so busy running around and checking all the doors and windows.

The next day, we marched out of Firestone and declared victory before a huge rally at the chapel. My brush with student activism changed my life.
Not just because of my successful tenure as security czar, during which I protected our sit-in from Princeton’s wild squirrels, but because of the rally that followed. In the days leading up to our library takeover, it was somehow decided that several Asian Americans should speak about the racism of the Vietnam War. This was an important moment, because, as relative political newcomers, we would often defer to the more numerous black and Latino students. But we had a lot to say about racism and the war, and our Asian faces would make a powerful statement. It was also decided that an Asian woman should be among the speakers.

This idea posed a certain logistical problem, since there were so few Asian American female undergraduates. None of us would do it. I had never spoken to a group larger than my fifth-grade class, and the very idea made my stomach churn. Yet the thought that no one would talk about women of Vietnam and the war seemed terribly wrong. In the course of my patrol runs through Firestone the night before the rally, I decided that someone had to do it, even if it had to be me.

During our triumphant march out of the library and into the crowded chapel, packed with a thousand or more people, I fought nausea and panic. I had never met a Vietnamese woman, and what did I know about war? But my mother’s stories rescued me: stories of the war that she had witnessed from her childhood spent fleeing Japanese soldiers, of the terrible brutality, of rape, torture, mutilation, and murder, and of the tremendous will to survive. I managed to walk through the long chapel without stumbling, and to speak of my mother’s experiences and the inhumanity of this war.

After the rally, an undergraduate student from Vietnam thanked me. Marius Jansen, one of my professors and a distinguished scholar of Japanese history, gave me a puzzled look and told me I didn’t sound like myself at all. His comment made me pause to think, for the first time, about the images I must project as an Asian American woman, and the images that might be projected back on me. Most of all, I was relieved and astonished that I, who a year earlier couldn’t correct my teacher’s pronunciation of my name, had spoken out loud. This Asian American movement was transforming me in a way such that I might transform others. Through it, I began to find my voice.

Finding my voice didn’t always mean that my words were welcome, even among my Asian American pals. One day early in my second year, I was walking across campus with my classmate Alan, a street-smart Chinatown boy from California. We were headed to the newly established Third World Center—the prize from our student strike and occupation of the library. On the way, we argued over the relative importance of race and gender. “The revolution must fight racism first,” Alan said to me. “Race is primary. Only after we eliminate racism can we fight sexism. Women will have to wait.” It was like being at home with my brothers. I called Alan a male chauvinist; a pig, even.

Furious at such attitudes from our “revolutionary” Asian American brothers, the Asian American women at Princeton organized a seminar on
Asian American women. Our numbers had grown enough to establish the first course on this topic on the East Coast, perhaps in the country. We didn’t ask the men not to participate, but they didn’t anyway. In our own space, we explored the social, historical, and political context of our mothers’ and grandmothers’ lives in Asia, their journeys to America, their experiences in sweatshops, on plantations, at home. We discussed our lives as Asian American women. I began to understand the Confucian hierarchy that forced women and girls into perpetual subordination. We, on the other hand, vowed never to accept being less than equal to our brothers.

But our class on Asian American women didn’t explore the silences that our newly created Asian American “family” imposed on us. We didn’t talk about sexual harassment or date rape within our own community. The language and the concepts didn’t quite exist yet. But the incidents did. My academic adviser, a distinguished Chinese professor, gave unsolicited advice—about sex—to his female students during their faculty consultations. When the professor added such tidbits to the discussion of my thesis, my newly discovered voice failed me. I had run headlong into the quandary common to women of color and others from beleaguered communities: if we air our dirty laundry, we bring shame on ourselves and our community. With the status of Asian Americans so fragile, why drag down one of the few respected Asian American professors? Years later, I learned that another female student, a European American, had filed a report with the university. The esteemed professor had been disgraced—but, at least, not by one of “his own.”

Women’s liberation didn’t offer much help at the time. I felt alienated after my visits to the campus women’s center. The women I met were more interested in personal consciousness raising than social consciousness raising. I wanted to do both, but their lives as white women were so removed from mine, which was entwined with my life as an Asian American. Yet this distance didn’t prove that race was primary, either. Other experiences made that clear, such as the time I met Gus Hall, a perennial candidate for president, on the ticket of the American Communist Party. He was speaking at Princeton with his running mate, Herbert Aptheker. Some Third World students were invited to a small luncheon for them; Alan and I went as representatives of the newly formed Asian American Students Association. Throughout the entire reception and luncheon, Hall and Aptheker, who were both white, spoke primarily to the African American students, pointedly ignoring Alan and me. To these American Communists, Asian Americans had no political currency; in their eyes, we didn’t exist, or perhaps they assumed from our Asian faces that we were predisposed to support China, a bitter foe of the Soviets. It was the first time I witnessed such a blatant race ploy by political “progressives,” but it wouldn’t be the last.

A whole generation of Asian Americans was getting an education about our identity. We couldn’t wait to leave the safe confines of our campuses, to share our lessons and our pride in this newfound heritage. Many of us went
into Asian American enclaves as community organizers, intent on making changes there. Our campus experiences made it abundantly clear that if Asian Americans were to take our rightful place in American society, we would have to scratch and dig and blast our way in, much as the railroad workers had through the Rockies one hundred years earlier.

Few in America, or even in our own communities, paid much attention to these young Asian Americans. Among the separate—and expanding—Asian immigrant groups, the vision of pan-Asian unity was not compelling; survival was their main focus.

Still, a dynamic process was set in motion: we were reclaiming our stake in a land and a history that excluded us, transforming a community that was still in the process of becoming. We were following our destinies as Asian Americans.